

“This Grace Given”

a sermon by

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Text: “but first they gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God” (II Corinthians 8:5).

I spent this past week on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary. One of the highlights for me was the opportunity to hear the opening convocation address of Dr. Iain Torrance, the new president of the Seminary. In that address Dr. Torrance did a remarkable job of placing the role of the Seminary in a global context. Dr. Torrance cited the work of a Jewish rabbi by the name of Jonathan Sacks and his book, *The Dignity of Difference*. In his address Dr. Torrance identified the great horror of the world in which we live today: terrorism on a global scale; a chaotic and violent war in Iraq; unbridled consumptionism, greed, and relativity. Torrance said in public what many have said in

private. One of the problems in our world today is the misuse of religion, not only in the world of Islam, but in the Christian world as well.

Torrance reminded his audience that the two hallmarks of our faith are grace and truth. Truth is what guides us, but truth is also balanced by grace, which means that we are free to have our differences, but respect and toleration must always be the forces that guide us.

I.

This morning we begin our annual Stewardship season. Over the next several weeks each member of our church will be asked to consider his or her pledge to the operating budget of the church.

For some “stewardship” seems to be a very mundane, if not boring subject. Most of us equate it with “fund raising,” which puts the church in a similar situation to other worthwhile activities in our community such as the United Way, the Arts and Science Council, and numerous other activities. Churches raise money to pay salaries, utility bills, programs, benevolences and a host of other worthwhile activities. But stewardship in the New Testament is not just raising money. Jesus spoke more about the subject of money and wealth than any other subject. Jesus understood that there was an intimate relationship between what we really value in life and how we spend our money. “Where your treasure is,” Jesus noted astutely, “there is your heart.”

But Stewardship goes far beyond simply trying “to pay the preacher” or keep the lights on at the church. If Torrance is right and we are living in a global society where religion is not only part of the problem, but also part of the solution, then giving to the church may take on any even more important notion than we have heretofore recognized.

Therefore, this morning I want deal with two questions: 1) What constitutes Christian giving? and 2) Why should a person give to the church?

II.

The answer to the first question is found in the Scripture from II Corinthians. In the early church there was a crisis in Jerusalem. A great famine arose and the Christian community in Jerusalem was suffering in the same way that many families are suffering today in Florida and in the Sudan. As a result of the crisis in Jerusalem a number of the churches in Macedonia received an offering to alleviate the suffering in Jerusalem. In Paul’s correspondence to the church in Corinth he notes that these churches in Macedonia gave not out of their abundance but out of their poverty.

Paul commented that the Christians of Macedonia because, “They first gave themselves unto the lord.” After that they gave a liberal offering for the poor saints of Jerusalem.

Christian giving always begins with the recognition that what we do is always in response to what God has done for us. Christian giving is not a way we earn favor with God. It is our response to God. It flows out of the conviction that, “We love because God loves us.” This distinguishes Christian giving from other types of giving, worthy as they may be.

As we begin our Stewardship season we are acutely aware of the needs of our church. Our Stewardship Committee has challenged us to increase our budget by five percent in order to fund adequately the programs of our church.

All of us are aware of the great ministry that we share in this place through worship, education, pastoral care and outreach. Each Sunday our worship service is broadcast to over 20, 000 people through WSOC-TV. We provide a Child Development Center and Weekday School. In addition our church sponsors thirty-five different outreach programs that benefit our community. The Loaves and Fishes Pantry in this church provides food for over a hundred families a week. Through our ministry of education we offer church school classes on Sunday and on Wednesday evening. Through a full time minister of Pastoral Care and a Parish Nurse we seek to minister to our congregation in times of need. The programs and ministries of this church are extensive in their scope and content.

So, why should a person give to the church? Why is this gift more important than any other gift? Let me suggest a number of reasons.

III.

First, we are called to give to the church because it is Biblical. Both the Old and New Testament emphasize the necessity of our giving to God in return for God’s grace to us. The Bible, in both the Old and New Testament, teach direct, systematic, and proportionate giving.

The Levitical Law in the Old Testament required that a person give a tenth of one’s increase to God. The prophet Malachi accused the people of robbing God by neglecting to bring their tithes and offerings and appealed to them to “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse.”

The Old Testament tithe was based on the conviction that God was the Creator and Owner of all things and that a tenth was but a just return to God on that which he had given. The notion of the tithe was never based on the belief that we can purchase the divine favor. It was not superstition but stewardship.

In the New Testament giving is not legalism but love. It is one of the ways that we show the love of God in Christ. This was the basis of the appeal that Paul made to the

church in Corinth. “Wherefore show to them, and before the churches,” writes Paul, “the proof of your love.”

Giving to the church is rooted fundamentally in our love for God. And love always prompts us to do more than the law requires. “On the first day of every week,” Paul writes, “each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come” (I Corinthians 16:2).

Secondly, giving to the church is an act of worship and a means of grace. *The Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) speaks of Stewardship as a “privilege and a duty.” In 1952 one of our Presbyteries overtured the General Assembly about the proper way of raising funds for the work of the church. The General Assembly affirmed then what it had affirmed in 1888, 1891, and 1916 that “it is both a privilege and a duty, plainly enjoined in the Bible, to make regular, weekly, systematic and proportionate offerings. This should be done as an exercise of grace and an act of worship.” The Assembly frowned on any other way to raise funds for a church other than a “recognition of our obligation to give in proportion to what God has given us.”

Some years ago Horace Greeley was approached by a group of people from a church that were seeking to raise funds. One of the people told Mr. Greeley, “We have tried in every imaginable way to raise funds for our church: fairs, strawberry festivals, oyster suppers, box socials, and mock weddings.” She went on to say, “Do you have any other suggestions?” Horace Greeley replied, “You might try religion.” There is no better suggestion than that.

A third reason for giving to the church is that it is consistent with the appeal of Christ. Jesus spoke plainly of the cost of discipleship. “If anyone would come after me,” he said, “let that person deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer once distinguished between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” Cheap grace is that which costs us nothing. Costly grace, on the other hand, reminds us that following Jesus always bears a price.

Throughout the New Testament Jesus gave great attention to the role that money and wealth play in a person’s life. “You cannot serve God and Mammon,” Jesus said on one occasion. On another occasion he said, “No one who lays his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Strangely enough, there is a point of intersection between the teachings of Jesus and the works of the German, Karl Marx. Marx taught a theory of “economic determinism” in human history. That is to say, Marx believed that a person’s view of life was determined by their economic status. Jesus also recognized that there is an intimate relationship between what people believe and how they spend their money. He knew that a person’s heart and a person’s treasure were closely allied.

A fourth reason for giving to the church is that it cements our commitment to the church. Often I hear people who say, “I give my time and talents to the church, but not my money.” Stewardship is always more than giving our money to the church, but it is never less than that.

One of the reasons I ask you to consider the financial support of the church this morning is that I believe that our gifts to the church bring remarkable dividends. Because we have a remarkable group of volunteers in this church, we are able to make our contributions do far more than ordinarily would be possible. We have volunteers who unload the trucks that supply the food to needy families, volunteers who distribute it. We have volunteers who tutor at Westerly Hills schools. We have volunteers who spend the night with homeless people at the Room in the Inn program. We have volunteers who provide the Camp Grier experience for disadvantaged young people in our community.

Fifthly, we are called to give to the church because the fundamental crisis of our times is a spiritual crisis and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only thing that can address this crisis.

Six years ago Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington argued in his book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, that the world today is divided not so much by geographic boundaries as by religious differences. Huntington predicted that in the 21st Century the great clash would occur between Islam and the West.

One of the currents that fuels Islamic hatred of the west is what some Muslims see as the “decadence and depravity” of Western culture. That is why the hedonism and materialism of our culture is so deadly. It is used against us in the same fashion that the terrible abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison are used against us.

Dr. John Leith once observed that the church has something to say that no other group in our society can say. That one thing we possess is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to transform lives and to transform the culture in which we live.

Over the next several weeks each of us will be challenged to consider our support of First Presbyterian Church. We are a church that can make a difference--in our city and in our world.

The stakes have never been higher. In a time when many churches are in decline, First Presbyterian Church is a growing, vital, center-city church. We can make a difference, but only if our membership supports us.

**May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.
Amen!**